Low physical activity is a risk factor for several chronic diseases in children. Sports participation is affected by perceived health directly and indirectly by decreasing smoking and alcohol consumption and feelings of depression and psychophysiological symptoms. In addition, active children perceive themselves as healthier and fitter than sedentary ones. This study investigated the associations of sports participation and perceived and actual physical fitness, and total physical activity in 525 10-17-yr-old boys and girls. They were divided into four age groups: 10-11 yr (56 boys and 64 girls), 12-13 yr (68 boys and 68 girls), 14-15 yr (70 boys and 71 girls) and 16-17 yr (68 boys and 60 girls). Physical Activity Index (PAI) was calculated using a questionnaire (Telama, Leskinen & Young, 1996). Self-perceived endurance, strength, flexibility, and body composition were also assessed. Questions about the satisfaction of physical activity, participation in organized physical activity and in competitions and watching competitions were asked. Two EUROFIT tests were used: 20 m endurance shuttle-run and sit-and-reach. The sum of nine skinfold thicknesses were also used. Stepwise multiple regression analysis indicated that the participation in organized physical activity was the most important predictor of PAI. In boys, organized physical activity characterized PAI by 16.4% (R² x 100, in 10-11-yr-olds), 36.7% (in 12-13-yr-olds), 35.9% (in 14-15-yr-olds, in combination with participation in competitions) and 16.9% (in 16-17-yr-olds). In 10-11 year old girls, participation in organized sport influenced PAI by 11.2% (R² x 100). In the older age groups, participation in organized physical activity in combination with participation in competitions influenced PAI by 23.4% (R² x 100, in 12-13-yr-olds), 30.1% (14-15-yr-olds) and 21.1% (16-17-yr-olds). Interestingly, perceived or actual physical fitness did not influence PAI in any studied group. It was concluded that the sport participation highly influenced total physical activity of children.

Keywords: Physical Fitness, Body Composition, Physical Activity